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Engaging Students in Physical Education:

Key Challenges and Opportunities for Physical Educators in Urban Settings

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A well-designed physical education (PE) program is inclusive, active, enjoyable and supportive (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2015).

Irrespective of location, programs are affected by a host of issues in the midst of various school and community climates. Trends toward urbanization in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) and worldwide (World Health Organization, 2016) suggest that more and more PE teachers will be working in urban settings.

In October 2009, *JOPERD* published a special symposium about “Engaging Urban Youths in Physical Education and Physical Activity” (Murgia & McCullick, 2009). Seven years later, many of those considerations remain relevant, such as large class sizes (Dyson, Coviello, DiCesare, & Dyson, 2009; Schmidlein, Vickers, & Chepyator-Thomson, 2014) and limited access to equipment (Schmidlein et al., 2014), a dedicated gymnasium (Fernandes & Sturm, 2010), or outdoor space (Dyson et al., 2009; Hobin et al., 2013). These structural challenges matter. For example, some data suggest that larger class sizes and indoor lessons are associated with students spending significantly less time in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and with teachers spending more time on classroom management (Skala et al., 2012). In addition, high rates of teacher turnover (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014), difficulties communicating with English language learners (ELLs; Kena et al., 2016),

and low self-efficacy (Fletcher, Mandigo, & Kosnik, 2013) affect teachers' ability to engage students in PE in urban settings.

The purpose of this article is to identify attributes of urban settings that influence how PE is taught, and to provide action-oriented strategies for addressing challenges and making the most of available resources.

To start the process, the authors conducted a comprehensive literature search to identify journal articles about urban PE, published between 1980 and 2015 from CINAHL, PubMed, Sociological Abstracts, ERIC, PsycNET, SPORTDiscus, and Google Scholar. The search identified 135 articles on research that took place in the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom; that included urban settings; and that addressed PE. The research team reviewed and coded articles to identify recurrent themes. The authors then prioritized themes that they believed would be relevant and actionable for practitioners in urban settings and focused the review on actions that can be taken at the school level, where teachers have direct influence, as opposed to district-level strategies (Tozer & Horsley, 2006).

The review was designed to look for articles featuring schools in urban areas. Still, some of these findings will likely resonate with readers who work outside of city spaces. For example, rural schools experience some of the same structural challenges (e.g., limited resources, shared space), demographic challenges (student mobility, ELL students), and contextual challenges (e.g., neighborhood safety, gang violence, high rates of child poverty) as many urban schools (Hennessy et al., 2010; Hertz & Farrigan, 2016; Jacob, 2007; Moore et al., 2010). Similarly, teachers in all settings are likely to encounter disruptive behaviors (Lavay, Henderson, French, & Guthrie, 2012).

The strategies discussed here highlight the importance of preservice training and ongoing professional development, reflective and responsive instructional practices, and partnerships with academic and community institutions.

Tailor Professional Development and Physical Education Teacher Education Training for Teachers in Urban Settings

Recent graduates of physical education teacher education (PETE) programs may be underprepared and overwhelmed when starting work in urban schools, especially new teachers who have had no prior professional experience in this setting (O'Neill, 2009; Sato, Fisette, & Walton, 2013) and those whose sociodemographic and geographic backgrounds differ from those of their students (Culp, 2011; O'Neill, 2009; Pope & O'Sullivan, 1998). Some research has suggested that veteran PE teachers may become frustrated when changing community demographics require adaptations to an established teaching approach (Chen, 1999; Griffin, 1985). Several studies have described scenarios where white PE teachers in schools with a majority of minority students found it difficult to effectively connect with students (Chen, 1999; Flory & McCaughtry, 2014; Griffin, 1985; O'Neill, 2009; Pope & O'Sullivan, 1998).

Increasing teachers' cultural competency may help ease some, but not all, of this friction. Although PE teachers from communities of color may demonstrate greater cultural competency than their white counterparts (Harrison, Carson, & Burden, 2010), starting work in a new school underprepared is challenging nonetheless (Sato, et al., 2013). In one qualitative study, several black PE teacher candidates reported feeling unsure of how to navigate cultural norms and stereotypes, including students' perceptions of "white" and "suburban" sports (e.g., lacrosse), after starting to work in urban areas without relevant preservice training (Sato et al., 2013). Recognizing this reality, faculty at multiple institutions have called for more specialized training that better prepares preservice students and early-career teachers for working in urban settings by including coursework and readings that address sociocultural issues, by placing less emphasis on team sports, and by increasing preservice teachers' exposure to schools in urban communities (Chase et al., 2011; Flory & McCaughtry, 2014).

Enhance Participation by Communicating Relevance, Creating a Mastery Climate, and Connecting with Students

Identify Relevant Content And Instructional Practices

Some PE teachers in urban settings have difficulty determining appropriate content to teach and have identified a tension between wanting to introduce students to a variety of ways to be active and deferring to games and sports that students identify with culturally and locally in order to maximize engagement and minimize conflict (i.e., "culture of basketball"; Culp, 2011; McCaughtry, Barnard, Martin, Shen, & Kulinna, 2006). Indeed, many students who do not perceive PE content to be personally relevant are inclined to disengage from the learning process, regardless of the setting. Finding the contextually appropriate balance between selecting PE content that resonates with student culture and exposing students to new movement opportunities can be challenging (McCaughtry, Barnard, et al., 2006). Nevertheless, teachers should consider this seriously to maximize students' connection and engagement with content (McCaughtry, Barnard, et al., 2006).

As in many areas, especially those with large class sizes (Bevans et al., 2010), urban PE teachers often spend large portions of PE classes on classroom management (Dyson et al., 2009; Skala et al., 2012). Although PE teachers may be unable to directly address some of the underlying "outside of the classroom" challenges to student engagement (e.g., food insecurity, community violence; Borofsky, Kellerman, Baucom, Oliver, & Margolin, 2013; Culp, 2011; Lawson & Lawson, 2013), increasing teachers' toolbox of pedagogical strategies and self-efficacy can assist teachers in maintaining a strong, learning-focused climate (Martin, McCaughtry, Kulinna, & Cothran, 2009).

Some researchers have found that teacher interactions that support students' personal and social responsibility and accountability are associated with fewer disruptions, increased participation, and greater enjoyment of PE (Balderson & Sharpe, 2005; Garn, McCaughtry, Shen, Martin, & Fahlman, 2011; Li, Wright, Rukavina, & Pickering, 2008). In an effort to support active participation and to limit off-task activities, some teachers offer games over skills-based activities because students might enjoy games more than repetitive skill

learning. However, students who seek attention from peers may see large-sided games as an opportunity to showcase disruptive behavior for a ready audience (Garn et al., 2011; Rovegno, 2008). Reducing the visibility of any one child's performance or skill via small-sided games or activities may reduce some disruptions when students feel less on display (Garn et al., 2011). Researchers and teachers alike have also identified split-gym, smaller-group activities, and circuits as effective ways of increasing movement in a large class within limited outdoor or indoor space (Chase et al., 2011). How teachers communicate with students and the kinds of feedback they give can further influence student engagement (Kahan, 2013; Morgan & Kingston 2008).

Create a Mastery Climate

Previous reviews have highlighted the importance of a mastery-focused environment (Rovegno, 2008) that supports student engagement, effort and enjoyment in PE (Gutierrez & Ruiz, 2009; Martinek & Williams, 1997; Morgan & Kingston, 2008). Providing feedback and input regarding student progress is an important piece of creating a mastery climate, and PE teachers should be mindful of the kinds of comments they give in public and what attributes they emphasize (e.g., effort versus performance; Morgan & Kingston, 2008).

Other mastery-supportive practices include (Kahan, 2013):

- providing students with opportunities to practice in small groups or with a partner;
- placing less importance on winning; and
- teaching activities that do not favor the most skilled students.

Connect with Students

Building a sense of relatedness, that is, students' perceived connection to their PE teachers and classmates, can enhance motivation for physical activity in PE (Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Shen, McCaughtry, Fahlman, & Garn, 2012). Showing interest in students can help build that sense of relatedness and also boost teachers' own satisfaction (Culp, 2011). Conversations with students can also help teachers gather information to increase the relevance of their lessons. For teachers with a large proportion of ELLs, learning a few phrases in students' native languages can help foster a connection (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011). Researchers have also called for increased cultural competency (Harrison et al., 2010) and culturally relevant PE curricula in urban settings (Flory & McCaughtry, 2014) and more generally (Choi & Chepyator-Thomson, 2011; Culp, 2013), in recognition of the growing ethnic and racial diversity across the United States (Colby & Ortman, 2015; Johnson & Lichter, 2010). Cultural competency requires teachers to become knowledgeable about their students, and to continuously observe, reflect and adapt (Flory & McCaughtry, 2014; Harrison et al., 2010). This process seems broadly relevant to increasing student engagement.



Actions to Support Student Engagement

Here are some actions PE teachers can take to support student engagement.

Inquire

Ask your students! Do what you can to know your students and to become known by students, parents and the community (Flory & McCaughtry, 2014). Learn about the activities that students like and want to learn and use this feedback to inform lesson plans (Doolittle & Rukavina, 2014; Kahan, 2013; Stride, 2014). For example, when developing a coordinated school physical activity program in an urban middle school, one PE teacher offered volleyball and table tennis as sports early on due to strong interest from students, including many ethnic Chinese students, at the school (Doolittle & Rukavina, 2014).

Reflect

Increasing cultural competence involves becoming aware of one's own assumptions, beliefs and biases (Culp, 2013). Hidden biases may be influencing your performance expectations and interactions with students in ways you do not realize. Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>) provides validated assessments that have been widely used to test such hidden associations (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2005; Nosek & Smyth, 2007). These include no-cost assessments that are related to race, sex and weight.

Listen and “Bridge the Distance.”

Try to provide context for students’ comments and tie the conversation back to the curriculum (Culp, 2011). Look for “teachable moments” that can both show respect for students’ experiences and advance understanding and learning (Culp, 2013).

Brian Culp described how a teacher who taught in the southeastern United States, but who grew up playing ice hockey in Canada, reacted to his students when they laughed and said, “Black people don’t play hockey” (Culp, 2011). Instead of ignoring the comment, the instructor came back to class with examples of black athletes in the National Hockey League and continued the planned lessons. He communicated relevance while providing an opportunity for students to develop skills related to a new sport (Culp, 2011). Seeing someone who students believe is similar to them perform an action provides a “vicarious experience,” which can increase their confidence to perform that same action (Bandura, 1977). Visual aids can be used to promote self-efficacy. As an example, teachers have reported greater participation among African-American girls in PE activities when presented with images/posters of black female athletes (McCaughtry, Martin, Kulinna, & Cothran, 2006).

Address Challenges through Strategic Partnerships

Institutions of higher education are often an important asset in urban areas. Partnerships with these institutions can enhance PE by:

- training future leaders through PETE programs;
- providing professional development opportunities to current teachers and coordinating the development of professional learning communities (Hemphill, Richards, Blankenship, Beck, & Keith, 2012; Tozer & Horsley, 2006) and teacher mentoring programs (Cothran et al., 2009; Hemphill et al., 2012; Martin, McCaughtry, Kulinna, Cothran, & Faust, 2008);
- piloting and evaluating new programs and curricula to help build the evidence base (McCaughtry, Krause, McAuliffe, Miotke, & Price, 2012); and
- collaborating on competitive grant applications (Hemphill et al., 2012; O’Sullivan, Tannehill, Knop, Pope, & Henninger, 1999).

Engaging preservice students in professional development opportunities with practicing urban PE teachers can yield mutual gains (Hemphill et al., 2012; LaMaster, 2005). Through such partnerships, preservice students have gained more experience in school settings and have learned from veteran teachers who, in turn, were exposed to new activities and teaching approaches (LaMaster, 2005). Similarly, school–university partnerships can enhance professional development opportunities.

One-day trainings risk overloading teachers with information (Kulinna, McCaughtry, Cothran, & Martin, 2006). Additional supports and follow-up are needed to help teachers put into practice changes in curricula and assessments (Kulinna et al., 2006; Kulinna, McCaughtry, Martin, & Cothran, 2011) or pedagogy (e.g., increase student-driven decision making; Ko, Wallhead, & Ward, 2006). Urban PE teacher–mentoring programs and peer

learning opportunities can help fill the gap by providing support beyond inservice trainings (Cothran et al., 2009; Martin et al., 2008).

Realistically, these collaborations take years to develop and multiple iterations to refine and troubleshoot (Hemphill et al., 2012; LaMaster, 2005; McCaughtry et al., 2012; O'Sullivan et al., 1999). One example of an urban university–public school partnership is the Detroit Healthy Youth Initiative between faculty and staff at Wayne State University and the PE teachers and administrators at Detroit public schools. The initiative has been in action for about 15 years, and through this relationship a range of professional development opportunities and at-school support, including a mentor system, were created, and grant funding was secured to enhance teachers' knowledge of wellness curricula, instructional technologies, and individualized lifetime-fitness activities (McCaughtry et al., 2012). More information about this partnership and other successful university–school partnerships can be found in the *JOPERD* feature, “The Dynamics of Promoting Sustained School–University Partnerships” (Patton, 2012).

The Carol M. White PEP Grant Program is one example of a funding mechanism that has been highlighted as a catalyst for collaboration between schools and universities (Deglau & Barnes, 2009; Hemphill et al., 2012; Rovegno, 2008). This program is not currently authorized for funding under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which means it lacks legal support to operate at this time. There are still opportunities to collaborate with academic partners on funding applications, as well as advocacy efforts and research initiatives to help make the case for dedicating more resources to PE.

Engage Community Partners to Address Structural Challenges

Schools located in urban settings are less likely to have a dedicated gymnasium or access to outdoor spaces (Dyson et al., 2009; Fernandes & Sturm, 2010; Hobin et al., 2013). Just as joint-use agreements can extend the use of school facilities to parents and community members (Jones & Wendel, 2015), agreements or permits with nearby community parks and playgrounds, universities, or recreation centers can support students' use of facilities that are not available at school in order to connect students with community opportunities for physical activity to extend their learning in PE (Chase et al., 2011; Doolittle & Rukavina, 2014). Applying for permits takes both time and knowledge of local government policies and personnel, yet this process can be taken on by a motivated teacher (Doolittle & Rukavina, 2014).

It is not uncommon for PE teachers to purchase equipment with their own money (McCaughtry, Barnard, et al., 2006). Though it may take time to establish them, partnerships with local businesses can secure in-kind donations or funding to support equipment purchases (Chase et al., 2011). Similarly, university support on grant applications and funding requests can be leveraged to provide professional development and new equipment for PE (Deglau & Barnes, 2009; McCaughtry et al., 2012). School fundraisers, organized through parent-led organizations or associations, can benefit PE programs (Doolittle & Rukavina, 2014). Individual PE teachers or other school champions can apply to grant programs that are awarded at the school level (Doolittle & Rukavina, 2014). These include

national initiatives, such as *Let's Move!* Active Schools, the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, Fuel Up to Play 60, state SHAPE/AHPERD organizations, and even private organizations that support causes related to physical activity, sport and children's health (e.g., hospital networks, health insurance providers and their affiliated foundations).

Forming Partnerships with Institutions of Higher Education and Community Organizations

Much has been written about how successful university and K–12 school partnerships can develop and flourish (Catelli, 1992; Hemphill et al., 2012; McCaughtry et al., 2012; O'Sullivan et al., 1999; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). School- and district-level administrators may already have relationships with university contacts. Teachers can approach school leaders with ideas for university collaborations to identify next steps.

Here are some dynamics to keep in mind:

- *Before reaching out, assess your needs.* What are you looking to gain through this partnership? Collect some information to back up your request. This could be as simple as reviewing your equipment and space, and then conducting a local inventory to identify nearby playgrounds, fields or recreation centers that could help meet needs through permits.
- *Outline and agree to shared expectations.* Create a memorandum of understanding before launching your work with a college or university. Consider what it would take to make the time investment worthwhile (VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). What outcomes does each organization expect will stem from this collaboration? Look for faculty members who have experience working in your community and a demonstrated interest in the goals and objectives of the proposed collaboration.
- *Recognize the importance of different roles.* Academic partners often bring knowledge of evaluation design and experience developing curricula and applying behavioral theories. Yet, school staff are experts on their school context, processes and interpersonal dynamics. It may take time to develop the relationships needed to communicate openly and to trust one another, but this is an essential step (O'Sullivan et al., 1999).
- *Make time to plan.* Frequent meetings are seen as a valuable way to share and respond to successes and challenges (LaMaster, 2005). Though time-intensive, retreats can be highly productive and can help to strengthen relationships and understanding (O'Sullivan et al., 1999).

Looking Forward

It is clear from the literature that teachers in urban settings work within many of the same constraints as they did 30 years ago. Further, many of these challenges are similar to those faced by teachers in other contexts. Two features stand out.

First, to be effective, PE teachers in urban settings have to understand the unique dynamics of their communities, families and students, and take what they learn and incorporate it into their curriculum and pedagogy. Knowing students allows teachers to tailor their pedagogical approach so that students find the educational process relevant, engaging and motivating. After all, student engagement is an essential component of any educational effort (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Second, K–12 schools do not exist in isolation. They are part of a wider community and network of potential resources, including parks, universities, community recreation programs, and funding opportunities. The key is having teachers and administrators recognize the opportunities that exist in their area and seek out partnerships that can help advance their goal of teaching children to be active and healthy. The density of potential partners in urban settings is a tremendous asset. Collaborative efforts with school, community and academic partnerships are expected to help school districts secure and make the most of funding opportunities — including evaluations to identify what works and dissemination efforts to make findings accessible.

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